

FROM THE INSIDE

Could I see your soul?

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Organ donation is the gift of life... but I have sometimes found it to be soul-wrenching. I wrote this story after a paediatric organ donation. Names and details have been changed.

‘Your eyes are windows to the soul’ I was thinking as I shone a light into your green eyes. They looked wide and innocent. The bruising around them, almost blasphemous.

I looked at you—7 years old—coming back with mum after visiting the grandparents. There was a car crash. Mum was fine but you—normally cheerful and bubbly—were crying, and then had a seizure, followed by a respiratory arrest.

Your eyes did not react to light, or to touching with a piece of gauze. No response to cold water in the ears, or to disconnecting from a ventilator.

‘The first set of tests shows that Joshua is brain stem dead. We will do a confirmatory second set shortly,’ I told your mum. She cried.

We contacted the organ donation team, and spoke to your mum who said she would like to think someone’s life had been saved using your organs.

I took you to the theatre—your mum walked to the door with me. I promised her I would look after you and stay with you all the time—I lied.

I connected you to the anaesthetic machine and theatre monitoring. Your skin was still pink and warm. However, the operating theatre was a hub of activity. There were three surgical teams, organ donation coordinators, big bags of equipment, transfer bags, phones, paperwork. I felt lonely in the middle for you. The most important person in the room—you—was almost being ignored.

The surgery started. We alternated between the thoracic and the liver teams to dissect around your organs (your little body was not big enough for both teams to fit

around you.) The kidney team would work on you after the heart, lungs, and liver had been taken.

I lied to your mum. Just before the surgeon cut into your skin—and warm blood flowed—I had blurred vision and had to step out of the theatre for a second. I couldn’t talk, and I had obviously got some grit in my eyes.

But I knew I needed to return and look after you—I had promised.

Each step felt like a desecration of the human body—cutting through skin, bone, clamping blood vessels, and finally stopping ventilation... suddenly, everyone was gone and in the theatre there was the anaesthetic nurse, me and the scrub nurse. We talked about you for a minute and then started cleaning you up.

I went to talk to your mum... she was very strong.

We found out later that you had helped many children—the heart and lungs went to someone with cystic fibrosis, the liver was shared between 2 children, and the kidneys helped 2 come off dialysis.

Your eyes gave the gift of sight to someone... and (even though I know the cornea is colourless) anytime I see someone with green eyes, I think ‘I know those eyes—I shone a light in them.’

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